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“WOULD TO GOD EACH TOWN HAD ALSO A GIRLS’ SCHOOL:” NEW VIEWS
OF WOMEN’S EDUCATION FROM LUTHER AND VIVES

Malia Marshall

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In the beginning of the biblical narrative, after Eve offers the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to Adam, God punishes women and says, “I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children. Your desire will be for your husband, and *he will rule over you*.”¹ For thousands of years, verses such as these were cited by Catholic leaders as reasons to not educate women. There was no reason to educate women if males were meant to be the dominant sex in society. This view of women’s education began to change from 1400-1550 during the rise of humanism and the Protestant Reformation. While both humanists and Martin Luther confronted the widely held, misogynistic ideas about women in support of girls’ education, Luther separated himself from the humanist educators by suggesting that both women and men needed to be biblically educated for their salvations, thus advocating for the basic education of women and laying a positive groundwork for the future spread of women’s education out of spiritual necessity.

Except in rare circumstances, the education of women virtually didn’t exist before 1400.² Even after this point, only the daughters of nobility were educated. In early modern Europe, the majority of the daughters of laymen never even reached basic literacy. Men did not see any point in educating their daughters when their only future roles were domestic, as wives and mothers.³ One of the only ways that women could be educated in medieval times was if they joined a convent. Education of women was seen as a threat to chastity. If a woman was educated and she

¹ Gen. 3:16 NIV.

² Victoria L. Mondelli, “Female Learning in Early Modern Europe: Advocates and Institutions” (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2009), 1.

³ Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 143-145.

began to speak out more, she could threaten her chastity. Most men even doubted that women were capable of advanced learning, and they thought that reason was a solely masculine quality.⁴ The education of women began when intellectuals made the case that women were capable of rational thought like men and that they possessed the same human characteristics; thus, they could and should be educated.⁵ Because of his religious beliefs, Luther also fell into that category.

Luther believed that everyone could understand God's word and earn their own salvation without the need for priests. He called this a "priesthood of believers." This theological belief was at the core of the Protestant Reformation's separation from the Catholic Church.⁶ Luther also believed that all people needed knowledge of Scripture so they could understand their salvation. He believed every person needed to read the Bible for himself. Finally, he also believed that "women were created by God and could be saved through faith; spiritually, women and men were equal. In every other respect, however, women were to be subordinate to men. Women's subjection was inherent in their very being and was present from creation."⁷

Humanist intellectuals were the other main proponents of female education in early modern Europe, besides Luther. Humanism was an intellectual movement that started in Italy. It admired classical works from Ancient Greece and Rome because of their content and style. Thus,

⁴ Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender*, 151.

⁵ Mondelli, *Female Learning*, 1.

⁶ Mortimer Chambers (et. al), "Reformations in Religion" in *The Western Experience* (New York City, NY: McGraw-Hill College, 1999), 441.

⁷ Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender*, 31.

humanists thought classical literature was the best type of learning for education. They believed that education in the classics prepared students well for political careers.⁸ One famous humanist educator who was influential at the same time as Luther was Juan Luis Vives, who wrote *The Education of a Christian Woman* for Princess Mary Tudor in 1523. This guide to education embodies the ideas of the humanist movement on female education.

Humanist Juan Luis Vives believed education was necessary because it was a tool to guard the chastity of women. Education for women was not as much about education as it was about virtue. Vives was a staunch supporter of humanist education for females because he believed it influenced them to live moral lives. In *The Education of a Christian Woman* he wrote: “The woman who has learned to make these and similar reflections either through instinctive virtue, innate intelligence, or through her reading will never bring herself to commit any vile act, for her mind will have been strengthened and imbued with holy counsels.”⁹ Vives believed that reading and education would not just educate women, but also, more importantly, serve the purpose of developing virtue. He also defended the education of women when he wrote that it would guard their chastity: “... in the education of a woman, the principal and, I might almost say, the only concern should be the preservation of chastity.”¹⁰ Vives believed the main point of education should be to guard chastity. While it may seem like Vives is saying that education is meant to keep women under submission to men, and so really not helpful to women, this belief

⁸ Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender*, 151.

⁹ Juan Luis Vives, *The Other Voice in Modern Europe: The Education of a Christian Woman: A Sixteenth Century Manual*, trans. Charles Fantazzi (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 65.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

was actually significant. In fact, his beliefs were a positive and transformative contribution to women's education. Victoria Mondelli analyzes the views of humanists like Vives on women's education through their actual writings in her dissertation. She says that Vives' ideas about women were actually a positive contribution because by writing that education protects chastity, he opened the doors to education for many women.

Their (humanist writers) proposals for slow and steady evolution... spread a positive opinion about the benefits of women's education... We can credit their work as a bridge which carried the humanist educational program to the wider human population. By bringing the new learning to women, and sanctioning their pursuit of advanced studies, these three men gave the often called "weaker sex" a powerful tool to strengthen their positions. In short time, not only was private education accepted, but schooling for girls was established.¹¹

Mondelli analyzes humanists' ideas within the context of the early 1500s, when it was revolutionary to believe that women were capable of advanced learning and that doing so would help to guard their chastity. This argument shows the revolutionary nature of humanist ideas about female education, and how they were used to counter the misogynistic ideas of the medieval era. In fact, Vives' ideas were almost innovative. As mentioned earlier, most men believed that educating women would mean that they would lose their chastity, so it would be dangerous to educate them. By creating an educational system that was solely meant to preserve the chastity of women, Vives was able to convince the men of the time of the value of educating women. Instead of education being a danger to women, it protected them. Mondelli even writes that Vives "met the challenge of chastity head on and squarely defeated it."¹²

¹¹ Mondelli, *Female Learning*, 135.

¹² Ibid., 122.

As opposed to Vives, whose sole motive for educating women was to preserve their virtue, Luther felt so strongly that everyone deserved to be biblically educated for their salvation that his writings, now compiled into many volumes called *Luther's Works*, advocated for biblical, and there, basic education for all women. Because Luther believed in a “priesthood of all believers” who were responsible for their own salvations and could understand it for themselves, he believed it was important for all Christians to read the Bible. This led to his call to civil authorities to educate children publicly. In one of *Luther's Works*, he wrote, “I believe also that among outward sins none so heavily burdens the world in the sight of God nor deserves such severe punishment as the sin we commit against our children by not giving them an education.”¹³ Luther believed that not educating children was a sin. If children were not educated and did not learn to read or write, they could not have read the Bible. Luther tried to make Protestants move away from just relying on priests to teach them about God and instead to learn about Him themselves. If everyone was responsible for their own salvation, that meant that reading the Bible was of utmost importance.

Luther felt so strongly that all people needed knowledge of the Scripture so they could understand their salvation that he called for the education of all children, not just of boys:

Above all, in schools of all kinds the chief and most common lesson should be the Scriptures, and for young boys the Gospel; and would to God each town had also a girls' school, in which girls might be taught the Gospel for an hour daily, either in German or Latin... Should not every Christian be expected by his ninth or tenth year to know all the holy Gospels, containing as they do his very name and life?¹⁴

¹³ Martin Luther, *To the Councilmen in All Cities in Germany* (1524), http://media.sabda.org/alkitab-8/LIBRARY/LUT_WRK.PDF.

¹⁴ Luther, *Address to the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Respecting the Reformation of the Christian Estate*, trans. C.A. Bucheim (1520), <http://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/luther-nobility.asp>.

At the time, almost no girls were educated unless they were nobility, but Luther broke with the culture at the time and was adamant about the necessity of educating all Christians, both male and female. However, though his ideas were quite revolutionary, Luther didn't completely reject all cultural ideas towards women. Luther and other Protestant theologians still believed women had been subordinate to men since creation, and that "marriage was a woman's highest calling."¹⁵ He demonstrated this view by saying: "Women are created for no other purpose than to serve men and be their helpers. If women grow weary or even die while bearing children that doesn't harm anything. Let them bear children to death; they are created for that."¹⁶ It would seem like Luther wouldn't advocate for the education of women if all they were meant for was domestic work. However, as mentioned earlier, Luther believed that all women were responsible for their own salvations, so knowing the Bible and how to read it was very important. In addition, Luther also wanted to create virtuous Christian housewives through education who could pass on their knowledge of God to their children. He believed that education would accomplish that:

This one consideration alone would be sufficient to justify the establishment everywhere of the very best schools for both boys and girls, namely, that in order to maintain its temporal estate outwardly the world must have good and capable men and women, men able to rule over land and people, women able to manage the household and train children and servants aright.¹⁷

¹⁵ Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender*, 32.

¹⁶ Luther, *Sammtliche Werke*, (Erlangen and Frankfurt, 1826-57), vol. 20; 84, quoted in Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 17.

¹⁷ Luther, *Luther's Works Vol. 15*, (1524), quoted in Larry D. Mansch and Curtis Peters, *Martin Luther: The Life and Lessons*, (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2016), <https://books.google.com/books?id=HU8zDAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=martin+luther>

Luther believed that education could be an asset to creating good Protestant housewives who would also raise the next generation of Christians. By teaching and memorizing the Bible and catechism at school while learning to read and write, girls were prepared for their roles as mothers. They could learn to live virtuously as women, as well as learn correct theology to pass on to their households. So, Luther believed that educating women not only helped their own salvations, but also helped their future children and the rest of their households to learn about God. While Luther's reasoning for educating females partially aligned with Vives' idea of education preserving chastity and developing women morally, that was not his sole reasoning behind advocating for women's education. By adding religious necessity to it, Luther made women's education even more of a priority.

In Kirsi Stjerna's book *Women and the Reformation*, she characterizes what the typical education of a Protestant female would look like after Luther. Stjerna writes:

During the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in particular, primary education of girls was mostly moral education, geared to providing basic reading skills, and occasionally including vocational training. The value of educating women was not considered to be in developing the mind of the individual but rather in ensuring the moral character of future mothers and wives, those fulfilling the noblest calling for all Protestant girls.¹⁸

After Luther, the main goal of Protestant education was to make moral mothers and wives out of girls who could teach their children and manage their servants to be the same. However, as

+the+life+and+lessons&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjVx_LG-KfQAhVS5GMKHXoqCr8Q6AEIHDA#v=onepage&q=martin%20luther%20the%20life%20and%20lessons&f=false.

¹⁸ Kirsi Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 44.

Stjerna points out, this meant females rarely received advanced educations, since the only purpose of educating females was to create a basic standard of virtue and religion.¹⁹

Sharon Michalove also argues in her essay that by educating the women of Luther's time practically so they could manage their households, women gained power in society. Some scholars say that by limiting women to the domestic sphere, the education of women had no meaning, since they had no influence in society to use their knowledge. However, Michalove writes, "The practical rather than theoretical basis that seems to be inherent... about education meant that the training... women received had to suit them for the obligations that society would impose... The skills imparted would enable a woman to manage her own household when she married, giving her the opportunity to exert power and influence within her society."²⁰ Through their education about how to manage their households successfully, women were able to "exert power and influence" in their society.

Because of Luther's beliefs that all people needed to read the Bible, he made the education of women a religious issue. Not only would education help the salvations of women, but also the future generations raised by their religiously educated mothers. By calling for the education of women for spiritual reasons, he made education a priority, setting the stage for the opening of public schools. While Vives proposed a more complex education for women based in the classics, including literature, Latin, and philosophy, for the most part, it was only available to noblewomen. But, because he called for the education of women for religious reasons, Luther

¹⁹ Kirsi Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation*, 44.

²⁰ Sharon D. Michalove, "Equal in Opportunity? The Education of Aristocratic Women 1450-1540," in *Women's Education in Early Modern Europe: A History 1500 to 1800*, ed. Barbara Whitehead (London: Routledge, 2012), 69-70.

gave a reason for Protestant men to educate every woman, even if it was at a more basic level initially. Luther made education accessible to more women because of the religious justification of it, which contributed more to the spread of women's education later. By making education into a religious necessity, Luther inadvertently gave women the start to obtain more opportunity in society through their education. Lowell Green points this out in his article, writing that Luther's theology made it so later "evangelical successors converted it (education) from an elite to a popular movement... so that the movement became part of the life of every Protestant community."²¹ Green argues that Luther's belief that all believers need an education allowed for the spread of public education for everyone of every class, including girls. While humanists did advocate for women's education, and helped to counter the misogynistic ideas about women of the middle ages, Luther's beliefs had a wider impact on the spread of education to more women because of their religious base.

While many agree that the educational advances for women made under Luther and the humanists benefitted women, some scholars argue that their ideas are sexist and only had the appearance of helping women. Joan Kelly, one of the first feminist scholars from the 1980s, argues that while women were able to receive an education, that doesn't mean they were starting to become equal with men. In fact, she argues that the humanist view of education hindered women's equality at the time. "This development... spelled a further decline in the lady's influence over courtly society. It placed her... under male cultural authority... Now her brothers' tutors shaped her outlook, male educators who, as humanists, suppressed romance and chivalry

²¹ Lowell Green, "The Education of Women in the Reformation," *History of Education Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (Spring, 1979): 96.

to further classical culture, with all its patriarchal and misogynous bias.”²² According to Kelly, instead of being taught by noble women, daughters of the nobility were now taught by males, who passed on their misogynistic views to their female pupils. Similarly, A.D. Cousins argues in his article that scholars should be careful of the extent that they say women benefitted from humanism. He explains that while humanists did argue for more classical education of women, it did not benefit many women over time. Since the primary role of a woman at the time was as a wife and mother, he argues that a woman’s education ultimately advanced “not the common weal, but the domestic, not the public, but the private good.”²³ Ultimately, Cousins believes that humanist arguments about how and why women should be educated were the writers’ own “myths” that “contributed to the advocacy of female education but did so ambiguously at best.”²⁴ Cousins makes the point that if humanists advocated for the advanced education of women, yet wanted to restrict them to the domestic sphere, then there really was not much improvement to their lives. Their education served no purpose outside the home. However, Cousin’s argument lessens the real advances that sixteenth century humanists made for women’s education. Through the lens of modern times, their arguments could be seen as “ambiguous” towards the support of women’s education, but in the 1500s, they were innovative and revolutionary, as said by Mondelli in her dissertation, quoted earlier in this paper. Cousins’ argument that by limiting women to the domestic sphere, they have no impact on society is also refuted by Michalove

²² Joan Kelly, “Did Women Have a Renaissance?” in *Women, History, and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 35.

²³ A.D. Cousins, “Humanism, Female Education, and Myth: Erasmus, Vives, and More’s ‘To Candidus,’” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 68, no. 2 (April 2004): 229.

²⁴ Ibid, 230.

earlier in this paper, who says that by learning to manage their estates successfully, women were able to “exert power and influence” in their society.²⁵

While both humanists and Luther confronted the misogynistic ideas about women of the 1500s in support of girls’ education, Luther separated himself from humanists by suggesting that both women and men deserved to be biblically educated for their salvation out of spiritual necessity, thus advocating for the basic education of women and laying a positive groundwork for the future spread of women’s education. Historians seem to agree that both Luther’s and humanists’ views on women’s education helped to advance the education of women. Though there is some debate about to what degree changes in education actually helped women, it is obvious that Luther’s theological view of the necessity of educating all women laid a foundation for the expansion of widespread education rights for women. While both Luther and humanists both believed the primary roles of women were as mothers and wives, they inadvertently gave them the start to obtain more opportunity in society through education. More research is needed to learn the actual effects of these educational beliefs, such as the educational programs that were available to females at the time, to see how well the beliefs of Luther and humanists were actually implemented. Further research will show how much the writings of these influential people actually influenced the development of women’s education, and whether it happened the way they wanted.

²⁵ Michalove, “Equal in Opportunity?,” 69-70.

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